

ALBERTA ASPECTS OF THE BENDER MYSTERY

I heard a curious tale one day when I was visiting in Pincher Creek. Specifically, I was sitting around in that tradition-filled gathering place known fondly to existing pioneers as "The Bucket of Blood". The "Bucket" isn't much of a place to see -- in fact it's just the back room of Pincher's cleaning and pressing establishment -- but by sitting quietly down on a broken chair in a corner (provided it's not some celebrated member's favorite corner) one may often hear some remarkable tales.

The curious story I heard in the "Bucket of Blood" is an epic which began in the State of Kansas in 1871, and according to my version, ended in the Province of Alberta some thirty or forty years later. I will, therefore, begin my yarn at the beginning -- where all good yarns start -- and with the help of the veterans of the "Bucket of Blood", I shall carry it through to an end.

When I was growing up in southeastern Kansas one of the famous folktales was the saga of the "Bloody Benders". Ever hear of the Benders? If you haven't it's not surprising. The vogue for the recitation of their deeds has pretty well passed now, but in the early 1870's perhaps no family in the United States was so well known. Why? There is only one answer: Murder . . . Wholesale murder.

One day in the spring of 1871, travelers on the highway between Fort Scott and Independence, Kansas saw only the vacant prairie that stretched in dreary flatness between the Sparks' homestead and the distant cabin that marked the home of the nearest neighbor. The next day there was a team and wagon and a party of campers at the side of the road.

This suddenly appearing outfit consisted of four persons: a mother, father, son, and daughter. They were the Benders. The ringleader of the clan seemed to be the daughter, Kate, who, in the words of one historian of the Bender doings, was:

The inspiration of the crimes -- the tireless one, the leader of the rest -- the killer. She was about five feet five or six inches in height and her weight was around one hundred twenty-five or thirty pounds. She held herself proudly erect, head high; alert hazel eyes, wide and very bright. Her lips were red, very red and pouting. It was a mouth to disturb the dreams of the young men who saw her. . . . The men of her time, chary of description and cautious of praise, called her "mighty good looking". A man of this day would unhesitatingly pronounce her beautiful. She talked glibly, incessantly. She laughed a great deal . . . she was vivacious and courted the attention of those whom she met.(1.

Kate seems to have been the only attractive member of the family. Her father and mother were slow-moving, stolid German folk, and her brother, John, had the mannerisms

1. Edith Connelley Ross, Collections of the Kansas State Historical Society - 1926-1928, Vol. XVII.

of a half-wit -- mannerisms which may have been a disguise for a most clever nature.

The Bender house turned out to be a light frame dwelling about sixteen by twenty-four feet and stood about one hundred yards from the road. The one large room was divided by an old wagon cover and a torn quilt hanging from the joists. Over the front door hung a drude sign: Groceries. In addition, the Benders advertised meals and lodging to attract the passing wayfarer.

There was a pit under the house with a trap-door opening into it, and at the back of the house the Benders prepared a fine, large garden.

Thus the scene was set for the grim tragedy about to begin: the murdering in cold blood of, at least, eleven persons, and probably others whose bodies were never recovered.

It is the accepted theory that the Benders killed their victims while they were seated at the table and leaning back against the wagon cover which separated the room. The traveler had no suspicions . . . how could anyone be suspicious of a buxom country lass as attractive as Kate. But when the unfortunate traveler leaned his head back against that curtain, perhaps to laugh at one of Kate's sallies, he was doomed. For behind the curtain Kate's father or brother was waiting, hammer uplifted, to strike.

Person after person mysteriously disappeared, and with each disappearance an increased terror settled over the countryside. People stopped traveling at night, and in the Bender neighborhood the settlers began to whisper about each other. In March, 1873, the drama starring the Benders was reaching its climax.

For in March, 1873, a Doctor York, of Parsons, Kansas, was returning from a visit to Fort Scott and stopped for the night at the Benders. Doctor York disappeared.

This was the Benders' first and last mistake. Doctor York was a prominent man. He was known throughout all the southeastern Kansas country, and he had a brother, Colonel York, who was equally well known as a politician and a man of action.

When Doctor York failed to come home, the Colonel saddled his horse, got a posse, and started a systematic search of every dwelling along the road. Among the dwellings they visited was the Bender place.

York told the Benders that he had traced his brother as far as their stopping house, and

Kate was too clever to deny having seen him. She told how he had watered his horse, made some little purchase and ridden away. Her account was frank and convincing, and she seemed solicitous for the safety of the missing man.

She finally spoke of her gift as a spiritualist medium, and offered to place this talent at the disposal of the Colonel in his search for his brother. She claimed that conditions were not right at the moment, however, for a successful seance. She asked Colonel York to return the next morning when she would be rested and ready. She asked him to come alone since the presence of the other men distracted her. "I'll find your brother, even if he's in hell," she told the Colonel. (1)

The Colonel took his men and rode away, convinced in his own mind that the Benders knew where his brother was, and resolved that he would return in the morning and face them down; for

the unease of the old man and his wife, their sullen resentfulness and lowering looks did not serve to inspire confidence. Instinct whispered that there was something wrong, deadly wrong in this place. Perhaps the pit (where the bodies of victims were dumped) called out to him with mute lips of despair . . . (2)

And apparently the Benders knew that they had failed to inspire confidence, for that same night they disappeared, utterly and completely, and no man could say where they went.

All that was known was that four persons, speaking with a German accent had boarded the night train at the nearby little town of Thayer, and that near Thayer was found a wagon, a team, and a colt, and that in the wagon box was discovered a roughly painted sign that said: Groceries.

(1) Connelley, Op. cit.

(2) Ibid.

Almost three weeks went by before a party was actually organized to search the deserted Bender homestead. When the search was finally made the whole nation paused for a moment of ghastly contemplation. Everyone knew at last why the Benders' garden was the best cultivated in the entire district; for under its smoothly harrowed surface were found the bodies of eight unfortunate wayfarers.

Of course searching parties were organized, too, to round up the Benders. Hundreds of tips as to their whereabouts were reported, not one of which was proven true. The Benders had had plenty of time. They were completely lost.

The memory of such events does not easily die. Looking back I can now understand how the subject of the whereabouts of the Benders became the topic for debates in the schools and the material for many speculative newspaper articles. I can easily understand how the memory of these told about events remained so clearly in my mind that when, at the "Bucket of Blood" in Pincher Creek I suddenly heard the name "Bender" I listened with keen eagerness.

"There used to be a fellow named Glasgow living near here," Tom Scott was saying, "and there was a considerable amount of mystery surrounding him. Nobody knew exactly where he came from, and nobody could explain the sudden trips he used to make down toward Montana. He never told anybody where he went. He came into the country here about 1888. He had a woman with him when he came, and pretty soon it was common knowledge around here

that Glasgow's wife was the famous Kate Bender."

For a minute I didn't say anything. All that I've written about the Benders so far in this article sort of rushed through my head. I sighed a long sigh and said, "Well, Mr. Scott, I've run onto a lot of curious tales in Alberta, but if the beautiful Kansas murderess, Kate Bender, really ended up here . . . well, that's as curious a tale as any I've hit yet."

"She was here, all right," Mr. Scott continued. "I knew both Glasgow and Kate very well. I got along with them, though a lot of people around here didn't get along with them at all. Kate always kept a gun or two a little too close for comfort, and Glasgow went armed most of the time, too."

"How did Kate and Glasgow get hooked up together, Mr. Scott?" I asked. "Where did she meet Glasgow?"

"Well," said Tom Scott, "there was a story about that that used to go the rounds down here. I can't vouch for it as fact, and I can't tell you now where and how the yarn got started. But the tale used to go that when the Benders left Kansas, Kate drifted out to Montana -- in those days a safe enough place to hide. She is said to have married in Montana a wealthy rancher, and that she and this rancher had a son. When this boy was fourteen years old the rancher died quite suddenly. It was found that in his will he'd left everything he had to his son."

"Was Kate supposed to have had a hand in the rancher's death?" I asked.

"I never heard that," replied Tom Scott, "but Kate certainly wanted the money. This man Glasgow was foreman on that ranch at the time, and it wasn't long before he and Kate began to plot how to get the money away from the boy."

I was making some rapid calculations and aloud I said, "Let me see. The Benders left Kansas in 1873. They left in the month of March, and if Kate went immediately to Montana she could have met and married this rancher that same year. If the boy was fourteen years old when his father died, and Glasgow and Kate appeared around here in 1888 that would have meant that the rancher died in 1887. Right?"

"I guess that's right," said Tom Scott, "it would have been close connections all around, but you'll admit that it could have been done."

"Yes," I agreed, "it could have been done."

"As I was saying," continued Tom, "Glasgow and Kate began to plot how to get the money away from the kid. It wasn't long before Glasgow solved the whole affair. He just tied the boy on a bronc and got him bucked to death. I suppose legally Kate would have then come into all the money and she and Glasgow came up this way. They lived a mighty close-mouthed life up here. They were both considered dangerous to deal with. Kate hardly ever left the Glasgow place at all. She didn't want to be bothered."

Tom Scott laughed suddenly. "I recall a friend of mine, Ed London, who was hauling timber one day. He had to cross near the Glasgow place, and I happened to be standing at the bottom of the hill just as I saw him disappear behind some trees near their house. In a minute I heard a loud yell, and I saw Ed come flying down the hill, whipping his horses every step. Wasn't anything but the front trucks of the wagon left, and Ed was hanging onto those and hollering at every jump.

"When he finally got stopped, I hurried over to him and he said to me, 'Tom, that Glasgow bitch was going to kill me!' He was so scared he was shaking all over.

"I knew Glasgow and Kate pretty well as I said, so I went up there and persuaded 'em that London was all right. They finally let him haul across their place, but he never made the trip again unless somebody was with him."

In the silence that followed I did a little reflecting. I remembered that every few years somebody has discovered, or pretended to discover, the final whereabouts of the Benders, and that some persons were even falsely arrested on the belief that they were members of the missing family. Like all story collectors with a new find, however, I began to feel that perhaps I had stumbled onto the truth: that Kate Glasgow was Kate Bender, and that, with a little luck and more evidence the mystery might be solved.

"What became of Kate, Mr. Scott?" I asked.

"She must have died up here, though exactly when, and where she is buried, I don't know. I've got a picture of Glasgow over at the house if you want to see it. He left Alberta in 1923 and moved to California. He died down there."

"I suppose you haven't got a picture of Kate," I said.

Tom Scott laughed. "No, sir. I don't suppose anybody every had a picture of Kate. She wasn't eager to let people see her face!"